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Teaching Matters in Early Educational Practice: The Case for a Nurturing Pedagogy

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Research Findings: Research on teaching practice in early-years classrooms of primary schools in Ireland suggests that teachers of Irish 4-year-olds continue to spend more classroom time on traditional, didactic, subject-based teaching than on the nurturing interactions recommended for quality, effective early education (N. Hayes, 2004; N. Hayes, J. O’Flaherty, & M. Kernan, 1997; B. Murphy, 2004). *Practice or Policy:* Arising from these findings this article argues that teacher education would benefit from a shift in focus from implementing a prescribed curriculum to a focus on the interactive nature of the learning process in young children. Although recognizing that such a shift is not simple, the article proposes that foregrounding the educative nature of care would afford a useful starting point. Introducing the notion of a nurturing pedagogy, the article contends that combining the concept of pedagogy (a space where care and education integrate) with the concept of nurture (conveying an engaged level of interaction) provides a rich and theoretically sound context for reforming teaching practice in early education.

There is little direct information on the activities of young children in Irish schools. We have limited information on time spent on activities, whether and how children engage with different activities, the balance between self-selected and teacher-nominated activities, or how teachers organize time. Neither do we have detail on the level or type of social interaction in the junior infant classroom. What information we do have has come largely from survey reports from teachers (Irish National Teachers Organisation, 1995).

Ireland's participation in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) project presented a valuable opportunity to redress this. The cross-national, longitudinal research project investigated the relationship between observable features of early childhood program processes and measurable setting features and the language and cognitive performance of children at age 7. Using hierarchical linear modeling at the levels of the child, setting type, and country, the analysis showed, among other things, that children had better language and cognitive performance at age 7 if their age 4 settings emphasized free-choice activities and if their teachers had more teacher education. Furthermore, children had better cognitive performance if they spent less time in whole-group activities and had access to a greater number and variety of materials (Montie, Schweinhart, & Weikart, 2007, p. 77). These findings suggest that teacher educational background and day-to-day practices do matter; how teachers organize their settings and the activities they make available for children do make a difference. Among participating countries, Ireland was unique in that 4-year-olds attended either a child care setting or a primary school setting. The independent development of the child care and educational sectors has been identified as one of the key problems facing the reform and development of early education in Ireland as, historically, the communication between the two traditions has been limited (Education Research Centre, 1998). Findings indicated that children had significantly different experiences depending on which setting they attended.

CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

In matters relating to the early educational needs of young children, Ireland has tended to remain fairly traditional in approach, with both structural and conceptual distinctions being maintained between care and education (Hayes, 2007). Compulsory school age is 6 years, but historically a majority of 4- to 6-year-old children have attended the junior classes of the state primary, or national, school system rather than specifically developed early educational settings. This continues to be the case despite extensive investment in private and community-based early childhood care and education settings (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). Although recognizing that the primary school system benefits from secure state funding, trained teachers, and regular monitoring, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that this early educational provision is "*insufficiently adapted to the learning patterns of young children*" (italics added, OECD, 2004, p. 6).

This article argues that the bioecological model of development provides a useful frame within which to consider findings from the microsystem of the Irish junior infant classroom. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) pointed out that the bioecological model introduces a new domain into the microsystem that empha-

sizes the distinctive contribution to development of the proximal processes. The *proximal processes* are those enduring forms of interaction between the child and the immediate environment that operate over time and are posited as the primary mechanisms producing human development. The concept of proximal processes has important implications for early education practice, highlighting the power of interactions and the important role of the adult. Through reflective observation of the child, adults can come to understand the characteristics of the child and the environment that will facilitate positive development and learning. The characteristics considered most likely to influence the direction of development are called *active behavioral dispositions*, and they can be developmentally generative or disruptive (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 1009). Bronfenbrenner and Morris described the manifestations of generative dispositions they considered appropriate to Western culture. One manifestation they noted is *selective responsiveness* in the child and a tendency to engage and persist in progressively more complex activities, for example to elaborate, restructure, and create new features in an environment—not only physical and social but also symbolic (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 995). Another class of developmentally generative disposition reflects the increased capacity and active propensity of children, as they grow older, to conceptualize their experiences. This, it is argued to contribute to the development of *directive belief systems* about oneself as an active agent both in relation to the self and to environment. In early education terms this notion can be linked to the work being done on belief systems, mastery learning, learner identity (Dweck, 1999), and learning dispositions (Carr, 1999, 2001). Cultivating positive learning dispositions and feelings in young children leads to positive outcomes in social, linguistic, and cognitive development and the skills necessary for later school success.

EARLY EDUCATION AND IRISH JUNIOR INFANT CLASSROOMS

Within the IEA study, researchers investigated the impact of early childhood experiences on 400 Irish 4-year-olds, 200 of whom attended informal preschool settings and 200 of whom attended the junior infant classes in the national primary school system (Hayes, O'Flaherty, & Kernan, 1997). This article reports on the findings from the latter group and is based on records from the integrated observation instrument developed by the IEA research team (Weikart, Olmsted, & Montie, 2003). This system was designed to allow for the simultaneous recording of time management with selected observations of child activities and adult behavior. This facilitated the cross-referencing of child activity against teacher planning and behavior.

Teaching Style

For the purpose of analysis teaching was defined as either adult centered or child centered. In *adult-centered teaching*, the teacher has greater control of the content and the activities available to the children, directly providing information for the children to learn, such as *giving/receiving information or knowledge* or *eliciting information or knowledge*. On the other hand, *child-centered teaching* includes behaviors that actively involve the children in guiding the learning process, such as *offering choices; encouraging activity; or providing assistance, clarification, and/or suggesting solutions*.

Irish teachers in junior infant classes were recorded most often teaching in a traditional, didactic manner. Most observed teaching time (29.5%) was spent in short and specific involvement—that is, the adult was observed to move in and out of children’s activities, supporting, clarifying, and correcting. Four-year-olds in Irish junior infant classes were also found to be following a broadly traditional curriculum where the “three Rs” still predominated. The most common subcategories observed were reading, writing, and numbers/math.

There was a great deal of similarity across school settings, which is not surprising given the fact that, in common with all 4-year-olds in Irish primary schools, the 4-year-olds in this study attended classes that followed a prescribed national curriculum and were taught by teachers who had degree-level training following a nationally agreed-upon teacher education program. The picture of this period of early education that emerges is one of Irish 4-year-olds in junior infant classes alongside, on average, 24 other 4-year-olds and one teacher. Within these settings children attend primarily to the teacher, usually in a whole-group situation. Setting activities show a high degree of similarity, with the majority of time (86.5%) proposed for whole-group activity. The range indicates that at least one teacher proposed whole-group structure for 100% of the time, with no teacher proposing this configuration less than 56% of the time. Neither of the group structures “joint activity” or “alone” were proposed by any teacher at any time during observations.

Most child observations recorded children in activities selected by the teacher, with limited freedom to choose activities other than those suggested. This reflects the common teaching strategy whereby a teacher specifies a number of possible options within a particular activity, such as math, from which the child would then choose. Findings on the interactions of children indicated a low level of interactions in junior infant classes, with children mainly observed working silently. When they were recorded as talking, this was most common during short periods of social or expressive activity (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). Although children were almost always observed in a room with at least one adult present, they were rarely recorded as interacting with that adult. Also, although children were mostly observed in the company of children, they were only occasionally observed interacting with them.

The high level of traditional, adult-centered teaching is unexpected, particularly given the stated child-centered nature of the curriculum (Ireland, 1999a) and the belief expressed by most teachers that the development of social skills with peers is most important for children of this age (Hayes et al., 1997). Children have limited choice in or control over the activities they engage in and, although teachers are recorded as proposing active participation at all times, the findings did not show children actively participating in their learning in a manner consistent with that advocated by contemporary early education research and literature. This is a cause for concern because such teaching creates the type of learning environment or dispositional milieu that research studies indicate cultivates performance rather than mastery learning in young children (Carr, 1999, 2001; Dweck, 1999). Read in conjunction with the research literature on effective early education (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Kontos, Burchinal, Howes, Wisseh, & Galinsky, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), the findings prompt consideration of the importance of process in practice and the potential of a nurturing pedagogy—balancing care and education—to enhance the experiences of young children in early educational settings.

DISCUSSION

Despite many references to the importance of balancing the care and education aspects of early education (Ireland, 1999b; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005), the educative role of caring is often underestimated. A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgment of the critical contribution of the interpersonal aspect of early education; the realization in practice of the proximal processes, the engines of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). To address this a reconceptualizing of care as nurture has been proposed to enhance the status of care as an educative dimension (Hayes, 2007). The idea of considering care as nurture gives it an active connotation, with a responsibility on the teacher to provide nurturance and foster learning as well as teach. Such a shift in emphasis requires a reassessment of the role of the primary teacher in early education and has implications for teacher education. It is insufficient to simply implement a “child-centered” approach, as recommended by the primary curriculum in Ireland; what is required is a developmental and educational model to facilitate respectful “child-sensitive” education in practice; a focus on the interactive nature of the learning process in early education; and the contribution of all, including the child and the context, to this process.

Research continues to illustrate that quality early education enhances young children’s learning in environments that are well planned and where staff are well trained, confident, and supported in their work (Bowman et al., 2001; Sylva et al.,

2004). Quality models of early education are characterized by underpinning principles that present a view of the child as an active partner in the integrated and ongoing process of learning, reflecting a strong commitment to developing the social and affective dimensions of learning as well as the more traditional emphasis on cognitive development. This reflects the views expressed by many (Bruner, 1996; Laevers, 2002; Pianta, 1999; Sylva et al., 2004) that the most important learning in early education has to do with the affective and difficult-to-measure aspects of development such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organization, learner identity, and confidence. Rather than attending to the implementation of a given curriculum, research suggests that it is more effective to have a well-trained workforce, familiar with child development and the subject material, that recognizes and respond to the dynamic and individual nature of development in the early years and that can work with an emerging curriculum that is driven by the interests and experiences of the children and the opportunities afforded by the environment (OECD, 2006). This is not to suggest a *laissez-faire* approach, but rather to locate curriculum content within the wider, dynamic learning environment. Such an approach requires sophisticated and nuanced planning and implementation; it moves the curriculum from externally determined to deriving from within the interpersonal context. It is a holistic, adaptive, and, ultimately, more effective approach to early education than that typically found in Irish primary schools.

Changing Teaching Style

A shift toward what—in practice—may appear to be a more informal teaching style will require a significant shift in approach away from traditional teaching, often that experienced by teachers in their own education. Dewey, among others, noted that the more informal the pedagogy, the greater the need for a formal structuring of the learning environment (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1938/1998; Gardner, 1999). This structuring does not require a particularly ordered or rigid routine or environment but rather can be expressed in pedagogy by the teacher through careful, informed, and reflective planning from a rich knowledge base.

One of the difficulties in translating research findings into practice is that practice happens in the real world, and learning is a far more dynamic and messy process than any text can capture. Contemporary research and literature confirms the importance of attending to this dynamic and messy process and informing such attention by reference to our increased knowledge about and understanding of the components of the process and their interdependence. The role of a teacher in early childhood education is crucial and multifaceted and has been characterized as a combination of listener, questioner, advisor, demonstrator, actor, sympathizer, negotiator, assessor, and guide (Athey, 1990). This article contends that teachers in early childhood settings must also recognize their role as “learners,” reflective observers of children who learn from observation and use this as the basis for peda-

gological practice. If teachers are to nurture children's learning as part of the educative process, they must develop skills of observation and reflection to allow for nonintrusive planning, provision of a learning environment that supports and extends children's own learning, and quality interactive opportunities. In order to nurture effectively teachers must interactively nourish, rear, foster, train, and educate the child. To nurture requires an engaged, bidirectional level of interaction and confers on the early-years teacher an enhanced educational role.

A Nurturing Pedagogy

In the literature on early education practice, efforts have been made to encourage teachers away from didactic practice by giving care and education equal status. However, attempts to raise the status of care in early education, such as the coining of the term *educare* (Caldwell, 1989), have not been very successful and have been criticized as being operationally weak (Karlsson-Lohmander & Pramling, 2003). Although the term *educare* has not really been taken up in the everyday language of early education, it has forced further debate about how best to consider these two interconnected elements of early education and, in particular, how to reconceptualize "care" so that it ranks equally with education in early educational process and practice. One identified obstacle to this is the strong association between the concept of care and that of mothering. To move beyond this it is necessary to improve our understanding of what it is to be a caring practitioner and to acknowledge that it goes beyond the notion of "gentle smiles and warm hugs" that obscures the critical developmental and educational value of early education and the complex intellectual challenge of working with young children (Dalli, 2003).

Reconceptualizing care as nurture would strengthen the attention to the educative value of care and allow for a more appropriate "nurturing pedagogy" to emerge in early education learning environments. Linking the term *nurture* with pedagogy is intended to focus attention on the implications for practice. Although well known in educational theory through the work of authors such as Freire (2001) and Bruner (1996), the term *pedagogy* is rarely used in relation to classroom practice in Ireland. Within primary education, practice is seen as teaching, with instructional overtones, whereas in preschool settings, practice is seen as care, with custodial implications. Neither term sufficiently captures the nuance and sophistication of the dynamic nature of practice required for quality early education. Although not widely used in Ireland, the term *pedagogy* captures the multi-layered and dynamic practice necessary to support children's holistic development. Petrie (2004) made the case for using this term to reflect the complex roles of those working directly with children and argued that the term creates the image of a professional space where care and education meet, integrate, and become one.

Combining the word *pedagogy* with the term *nurture* is intended to strengthen this professional space. The word *nurture* has a distinct and different tone to it than

the word *care*. In comparing the meaning of the two words, *nurture* is more engaging and active than *care*. By definition (Oxford English Dictionary, 1998), the verb *to care* is almost custodial in tone and requires a minimum of interaction; the adult merely provides for and looks after the child. *To nurture*, on the other hand, conveys a far more engaged level of interaction, requiring the adult to actively nourish, rear, foster, train, and educate the child through his or her practice.

Skills of observation and reflection are central to a nurturing pedagogy. They enhance practice and planning and are manifest in well-managed yet reasonably flexible practice and in the provision of a learning environment that includes the child and supports and extends the child's learning. This allows for increased attention to positive interactions between both child and teacher and child and child. It also allows for planning by teachers for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning, giving them a key role that takes the child, rather than the content, as central. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organizational/management role of the practitioner evident from the research into Irish practice with young children in primary schools (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). It also strengthens the focus on the pedagogical role of teachers, sometimes absent in more play-based settings (OECD, 2004; Weikart et al., 2003). A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue, and planning, leading to the shared construction of knowledge between the child and teacher within the context of an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now.

Teacher Education

This pedagogy highlights the importance of initial and continuing professional development for the teacher. A shift toward a "nurturing pedagogy" in the early years of Irish primary schools in particular will require a reform of teaching practice, which has implications for teacher education. The caliber and training of professionals who work with children are key determinants of high-quality provision (Ball, 1994). Despite the apparent obviousness of such a statement, and the empirical support for it, debate about how best to educate teachers for work in early education has not been high on the Irish agenda. Teacher education continues to be addressed in terms of the existing structures within which children are educated, rather than in terms of children as learners. Recent reports on primary teaching continue to maintain the view that the current approach to primary teacher education (i.e., the provision of a generalist degree) is appropriate and adequate for the education of all children within the primary school, including those under the compulsory school age of 6 years (Ireland, 2001). Outside the school sector, there has been increased attention to, and financial support for, professional development in the early-years sector, but to the exclusion of primary teacher education (Ireland, 2002; Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). It is time for a more creative and developmental response to reforming teacher education, possibly through collabo-

ration between colleges of education and higher education institutions providing professional education and training for adults working in early education. Such an integrated approach to training, taking account of contemporary understandings of the critical role of processes in early education, would create an opportunity to reconsider educational practice across a variety of settings, including primary school infant classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Teaching practice in Irish junior infant classes continues to be insufficiently responsive to our current understanding of young children's learning. This article proposes that introducing the concept of a nurturing pedagogy could act as a basis for change. A nurturing pedagogy encourages reflective practice whereby the teacher creates rich, interactive learning environments. In addition, it facilitates the early identification of difficulties in individual development and early action to address them either in the context of the classroom setting or through outside interventions. Implicit in the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy is a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1995) and in itself a form of assessment (Carr, 2001). Finally, a nurturing pedagogy extends the underlying idea of respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process, while at the same time recognizing and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education in practice.

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